

Choosing To Be a Good Teacher

A Boston Teacher Calls for Expanded Professional Development Opportunities

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Unlike many of my colleagues, I wasn't "trying out" teaching as a profession. As early as elementary school, I knew I wanted to teach. My commitment to teaching grew out of my commitment to social justice. From my own experience, I knew that whether or not a child receives a good education often hinges on the child's socioeconomic status, ethnicity and gender. The irony in Boston is that we have world-renowned colleges and universities, yet our pre-K-12 public school program isn't effectively preparing local students to attend these institutions. Given this reality, I dodged the lure of more lucrative and prestigious careers, faithful that with passion and the right training, I could have a positive impact on my students' educational experience while pursuing my commitment to social justice.

One week before the first day of school, I was offered a teaching position at a comprehensive high school in Boston. Theoretically, I had been well-prepared to assume my new assignment as a social studies teacher. On the first day of school, I arrived in my best suit with my "flawless" lesson plan ready to teach. But my first lessons did not go as planned. Despite my good intentions, my classes were unorganized. My curriculum did not address the needs of my students who were not reading at grade level. I had not established clear classroom routines and expectations. But I was confident that if I worked harder my classes would improve. I read through old college and high school notes, went to public libraries to gather reading materials, surfed the Internet and picked teachers' brains for lesson plans that would engage students.

Within a month of teaching, I realized something that my students had discovered the first day they met me. I did not know how to teach. I was like every new teacher: I was working extremely hard and getting few results. Veteran teachers empathized with me declaring, "First year is always hard. You'll figure it out." This did nothing to alleviate my ultimate sense of failure. My students were too far behind academically for me to waste their time figuring out how to teach. I held myself accountable for their miseducation. My bachelor's degree in history, my master's in education, and my teaching certificate, it turns out, had provided me only with the theoretical foundation to become a good teacher. I had to humble myself and accept the fact that even with my pre-service professional training, I was just a well-intentioned, mediocre teacher.

But many good teachers start out that way. They need professional development to hone their craft. And effective professional development is a time-consuming, career-long process. After all, there is

always a new challenge for a teacher to surmount.

A survey by the U.S. Department of Education notes that teachers who did more than eight hours of professional development were more likely to report that participation significantly improved their teaching. Yet the same report reveals that "participation of regular full-time public school teachers in professional development was likely to be short term, typically lasting from one to eight hours."

The Boston Public Schools provide three in-service professional development days for teachers each year. I recall using these opportunities to participate in two-hour workshops led by well-meaning education consultants. I had a sense that the invited consultants believed that we need only implement their particular "best practice" to become good teachers. These in-service workshops were more like troubleshooting approaches to teaching and, as a result, did little to improve my classroom practice. If professional development is to be meaningful, it must be integrated into the culture of the school. Teachers need time to re-examine, exchange, adjust and re-implement new curricula and teaching strategies. This cannot happen overnight.

In-service professional development must be teacher-driven. Every good teacher knows that learning occurs when students develop their "need to know." Similarly, teachers must be given the autonomy to identify their own pedagogical questions, as well as the opportunity to explore solutions to their questions. Unfortunately, many teachers find that in-service professional development workshops focus primarily on disseminating information on state or district curriculum and performance standards, according to the Education Department study. These workshops designed by non-teachers offer minimal support for the teacher's work in the

classroom. Curriculum is sensitive to multiple factors including teacher expertise and personality, student academic skill and personality, classroom space, the socioeconomic status of students and teachers and time spent in class. Knowing curricula standards does not necessarily mean that teachers know how to teach to curriculum standards. To improve my teaching, I needed to develop techniques for identifying my classroom challenges, proposing informed solutions, implementing my solutions and assessing the outcome. I had to be at the center of my professional development because I was the only expert on my classroom challenges.

As a second-year teacher, I participated in a teacher inquiry group facilitated by veteran Boston Public School teacher Steven Gordon, who was hired by the Boston Plan for Excellence to conduct teacher inquiry groups at all the city high schools where the business-supported group is implementing “whole school” reforms. Throughout the school year, Gordon would meet with me once a week with his tape recorder, and we would talk about my teaching. As he listened, I would fumble for words to describe my exact classroom challenge and how I planned to resolve it. Our recorded weekly conversations offered an in-depth exploration of my teaching philosophy and practice. All the teachers who chose to participate in the inquiry group would meet biweekly to discuss the strategies we used to resolve pedagogical questions. In this teacher inquiry group, I learned there are various models of excellence in teaching and I had the professional responsibility to discover my own. It is this sustained dialogue about my teaching that has helped me assume professional understanding of my practice and my students’ performance.

Given that quality teaching is essential to increasing student achievement, it is imperative that public schools and institutions of higher education design professional development programs that encourage teachers to flourish. These professional development initiatives must be integrated into the teachers’ daily routine. Decisions on school schedules and professional development initiatives must be based on the premise that the more teachers know about their content and their teaching, the more they can offer students.

Universities should demand that pre-service teachers not only develop expertise in their major but that, as students, they are also exposed to good teaching in their own classes. Because teachers cannot teach what they don’t know, universities should offer in-service teachers subsidized tuition to encourage dialogue between classroom teachers and university professors. As teachers and professors exchange ideas about teaching strategies and share their academic expertise, all students will benefit. Moreover, schools

that are committed to professional development must engage teachers beyond the usual September-to-June timeframe. Teachers cannot report to school only 24 hours before the students arrive. They need compensated time outside the school year to develop their expertise. Universities provide professors with travel grants, sabbaticals and budgets to purchase books and attend conferences for their own professional development. School districts should adapt these models for elementary and secondary teachers.

SEEKING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES IS MORE A MORAL CHOICE THAN A PROFESSIONAL OBLIGATION.

Unfortunately, teachers in Boston Public Schools, for example, are not held accountable for student performance, nor do they hold authentic decision-making authority in the school system. There are few external incentives for teachers to pursue professional development. The teacher who tirelessly works on developing expertise receives the same salary and decision-making power as the other teachers in the building who could not care less about teaching.

Seeking professional development opportunities is more a moral choice than a professional obligation. Public school systems and schools of education must respect teachers as professionals by:

- enforcing rigorous teaching standards;
- holding teachers accountable for student performance;
- offering teachers whatever it takes to develop their expertise; and
- giving teachers authentic decision-making power in establishing curriculum and performance standards.

I wish I could say that if institutions of higher education and public schools do not adjust their professional development programs to meet the needs of their dedicated teachers, schools will run the risk of losing them forever. But I can’t. Those of us who are passionately committed to improving public education for our kids cannot leave the classroom. We have made the moral choice to be outstanding educators regardless of systematic professional support. While we learn how to teach, however, students are suffering from our ignorance and exhaustion.

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